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THE INSTRUCTIONAL FILM IS DEAD.

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Some of the "quality short films" available today are far more effective for film study than the traditional instructional films. The explicit learning from the noninstructional type of film (e.g., "You're No Good," the story of a young dropout) must occur through inference as the impact of the film is deepened through provocative class discussion. Such a film can be used to (1) illustrate literary or filmic techniques, (2) parallel another object of study as a means of seeing both sharply, (3) reveal the implications of an historical or literary idea, (4) motivate discussion, and (5) encourage serious self-reflection. Primarily, however, the film should sufficiently involve students for them to want to discuss it. In a productive discussion, the teacher should attempt to clarify all questions, relate remarks to specific moments in the film, and conclude the discussion with a second showing of the film. (JB)

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The Instructional Film is Dead

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Maybe it was never alive; it was just used.

by William Kuhns, S.M.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL FILM IS DEAD. (Maybe it was never alive. It was just used.) Teachers who haven't discovered this are learning it fast. Students today refuse to accept the flaccid, slightly nervous college professor who lectures in front of a camera. Indeed, many teachers are recognizing that because of their failure to use language specific to film, these celluloid lectures can hardly be called "film study."

The real challenge to the teacher using film in the classroom is to make sure that each film is felt by the students as only good film can be felt. Something about a well-made film communicates in a deep, provocative way. Charlie Chaplin could make himself felt through his wild, inimitable gestures; a motion picture like *Grand Prix* makes an impact through the sheer force of its moving images.

Locating short films which are not primarily instructional but engaging and relevant can be difficult. But doing so is critically important if students are to experience, and not simply endure, a film. Short films which use filmic language and speak powerfully to students are available; and their range is wide enough to make them useful in social studies, English, religion, art—even science and math. Films like *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (a powerfully told story of a hanging); *End of Summer* (the final week in a Canadian summer camp); and *The Persistent Seed* (a description of life's determination to sprout in the midst of the city's concrete) can raise questions which will deeply involve students.

Because these "quality short films" enable students to involve themselves personally, they must be used in ways totally different from the manner in which typical instructional films were used. An instructional film would simply supply information on a kind of projected blackboard. A short film made without any instruction in mind (made, in fact, to delight or disturb) will depict its subject matter so that whatever explicit learning does occur must be inferred—drawn out through discussion and a deepened understanding.

An example. *You're No Good* is a thirty-minute short released recently by the National Film Board of Canada. It was made by George Kaczender, who made a similar film, *Phoebe*. Eddie, the central character, is a high school dropout who carries his grudge against the world with an obstreperous vehemence. There is little story. Eddie steals a motorcycle, ditches it along a highway and runs from place to place to stay ahead of the police. A friendly social worker talks him into giving himself up. The real force of the film lies in its fast, hammering images of Eddie's near past and his anticipated future. The film, probing Eddie's anxious mind, moves from the world of the present to the world of the future, then to the world of the past—almost too rapidly and too unnoticeably for the viewer to distinguish clearly which world is which. The total effect is a profound sense of what Eddie senses: the antagonism and pressure of a society which has made him an outcast.

This film could be used in a number of ways: as a social commentary for a civics course; as a filmic example of point of view for an English course; as a statement about purpose in life in a religion course. But inevitably *You're No Good*, like other effective short films, is larger than the curriculum structures through which it is approached. And inevitably its effect on an individual student will transcend the particular purpose for which it was shown.

To screen such a film as *You're No Good* and

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attempt to draw any single idea or lesson from it (without permitting the students to explore, somehow, its meaning for them) would be to miss its potential as an experiential film. How then—given the fact that an English teacher is working toward a different purpose than a social studies teacher—should films like *You're No Good* be used?

I have found four successful uses for the short film. All of them emphasize discussion, though in different ways.

In the first case, the short film can parallel an object of study as a means of seeing that object in a sharper, more revealing light. An example, effective with upperclassmen, would be the contrast between the short film *Run!* and a book like *The Odyssey*. *The Odyssey* depicts a great man returning home, and in the process describes his achievement of identity and the values he treasures. *Run!* contrasts glaringly with *The Odyssey*. Here a man races, stumbles, lunges through streets, brush, and stream to escape an approaching figure in a dark coat. Only after the runner has fallen from a steep cliff and approaches a seashore grave does he recognize his pursuer: himself. The runner is tipped into the open grave by his pursuer, and once in it, buries himself. *Run!* poses a grim interpretation of modern life roughly analogous (though in an opposite way) to the interpretation of Greek life seen in *The Odyssey*. Through a discussion of the contrasts (they are innumerable: one man runs toward, the other from; one is propelled by the desire to become more fully himself, the other by a fear of facing himself) both *The Odyssey* and *Run!* can be understood more effectively.

Paralleling a film with an object of study succeeds when the film provides a clear alternative expression, not a simple illustration, of what is being studied. The use of a short film to illustrate a point should be, I think, discouraged, simply because a worthwhile film will do more than illustrate a point. It is a form of communication all its own, and should be respected for this.

Many effective shorts, however, treat themes which are an ostensible part of the curriculum. And here the second use of the short film can be seen: the revelation of the meaning, the implications of an historical or literary idea. For example, *Hangman*, (an animated short built around Maurice Ogden's stark poem) depicts a town in which a hangman appears and gradually hangs everyone—beginning with the Negro and the Jew and ending with the "innocent men" who simply stood by. The double impact of the verse together with the film's strong imagery almost belabor the theme that a man's apathy in the face of evil will enable that evil to destroy him. But *Hangman* can probably rouse more thought about the meaning of Hitlerism than several discussions about Germany in the 1930's.

The key here is opening discussion with students and thereby reveal the meaning of a film. To announce beforehand that *Hangman* will show what Hitler has meant to Western civilization would ruin the film's impact. Within the context of the historical study of World War II it would be necessary simply to show a film like *Hangman* and leave the discovery to discussion. Understanding will usually emerge.

A third, and much less controlled use of the short film, is its utility as a discussion-starter when the discussion—rather than a predictable outcome—is the important point. Lively discussions are always a healthy sign of learning, even if the conclusions cannot be outlined neatly in a notebook. And a surprising number of short films lend themselves more to a completely open discussion than to any specific idea. Of course, context counts for something. But suppose an English teacher taking composition wanted to insure some degree of originality. A film like *The Golden Fish* is seen differently by everyone who sees it (as any discussion will bear out). In this charming French story of a boy, a goldfish, a bird, and a cat, the entire interplay of elements which would be expected is upset. The bird and the fish (sworn enemies?) are overjoyed to be with each other—though the bird is in a cage, the fish in a bowl. When the cat, stealthy and dark, appears and paws at the birdcage, everyone waits to see it eventually desist and grab for the fish instead. But in *The Golden Fish* the cat is the savior; he rescues the fish (which had jumped from the bowl) and leaves the two to their fun. What to make of that? No theme is immediately apparent, but the film provokes a variety of ideas. And simply urging students, especially the less vocal ones, to articulate these ideas is reason enough for showing the film.

A fourth and final suggested method would apply to courses in which a degree of self-reflection —rather than the communication of any set ideas —would be the purpose for using a film. Here the film diminishes as a center for discussion, and the student's own experiences (evoked largely through the film) become the focal concern. Obviously only a relatively few films could do this effectively. One example would be *The Violinist*, cartoonist Ernest Pintoff's sympathetic tale of Harry, the frustrated violin player. Harry roams Manhattan in search of someone to play his violin to. A sewer worker, a bus conductor, and a lady all insist that his playing is terrible and beg him to stop it. Even a friendly dog, Felix, bites Harry's leg when he tries to play. All of this Harry finds excruciat-

ing, so he visits the famous violin teacher, Andreas Filenger. Andreas tells Harry he must learn to play with feeling; and to play with feeling he must suffer. So Harry suffers. He stops eating and becomes pitifully thin. He stops shaving and walks around with a musty, ugly beard. Having suffered, he now plays the violin with great feeling. But nobody will listen because they can't stand looking at such an ugly man. Even Andreas Filenger walks out on poor ugly Harry. As a result Harry returns to "normalcy"—no longer a violinist who can play with feeling.

In terms of a high school student's social life, *The Violinist* touches home. Once they look, students will see themselves acting as Harry, or as the people who refuse to let Harry be fully himself. A striking parable for such a brief cartoon (seven minutes), *The Violinist* makes quick and worthwhile contributions to a boy's or a girl's self-understanding. Each episode in this film has counterparts in daily life, and once a student has caught the message of the film, this counterpart won't be especially difficult to find.

These four uses of short films are only suggested variations of what really is the only way of using these films: getting students involved enough in them to discuss what has been going on.

Discussion, of course, has its perils. Almost inevitably in a group of young people larger than ten a leader will emerge—in a way that will generally squelch some of the more sensitive comments (or comments by some of the more sensitive students). Maintaining the delicate balance between a free openness for ideas and some kind of progression is never easy, and rarely entirely successful. Some good guidelines for discussion are: clarify the questions asked, so that everyone knows what is being discussed; relate remarks to specific moments in the film whenever possible; and keep remarks related to what was said by the last speaker.

Whenever it can be done, a second showing will generally prove valuable. A second showing gives the students a greater security in discussion, and a sense of being much closer to the film than they feel after a single showing. An effective arrangement is to show a film, discuss, then conclude by showing it a second time. Many of the questions sparked by discussion will take hold after a second showing.

In whatever context they are used, short films will depend for their effect upon two important things: that they be the right films, and that they be allowed to speak for themselves. Beyond this, the responsibility really lies more with the student than with the teacher—where, after all, it should belong.

FILM SOURCES

The Golden Fish (color, 20 minutes)
Rental: Columbia Cinematheque, 711 Fifth Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10022. Inquire Michael Tarant for price. INFOCARD 190

Hangman (color, 12 minutes) INFOCARD 191
Sales and Rental: Contemporary Films, Inc., 267 W. 25th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10001. $135.00, $12.50.

Run! (b/w, 16 minutes)
Sales and Rental: Brandon Films, Inc., 221 W. 57th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10019. $90.00, $12.50. INFOCARD 192

The Violinist (color, 7 minutes)
Sales and Rental: Brandon Films, Inc. $100.00, $7.50. INFOCARD 193

You're No Good (b/w, 29 minutes)
Sales and Rental: Contemporary Films, Inc. $160.00, $8.00. INFOCARD 194